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Translated Landscapes

Jesse Proudfoot

Email: jproudfoot@gmail.com

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Translated Landscapes

Discussing *Die Welt in Farben* as an artwork is inseparable from describing the process of its production. The simple act of naming the objects that comprise it seems to inevitably lead into a convoluted process of explaining the series of activities that produced them. If this sounds abstract, let me try to describe the work as plainly as possible: *Die Welt in Farben* consists of 41 photographs retouched with oil paint. This description tells only part of the story however, for while these appear at first to be re-touched photographs, closer analysis forces one to acknowledge that they are just as much paintings as they are photographs—to say nothing of the fact that they are also collages at the same time. The simple description then, of these objects as “re-touched photographs”, leads to far more ornate descriptions of the process that created them. What confronts us in *Die Welt in Farben* are photographs, paintings, paint on photographs, and photographs of paint, all of which have been affixed to the original photograph, photographed again, and finally re-painted with antiquated photo oil paints.

Die Welt in Farben, then, is a work that incorporates photography, painting, and collage in such a way that it poses questions about the relationship between each medium as a practice. In this essay, I want to consider the objects that comprise *Die Welt in Farben* as instances of *translation*. This is a work that provides us with examples of formal translations from one medium to another, literary translation between languages, and pictorial translations of landscapes and portraiture. In doing so, it illuminates a number of issues that have been central to Murray’s practice for many years, a practice that has shifted from one defined by painting to one increasingly concerned with photography. My argument is that *Die Welt in Farben* can be understood as an exercise in translation in two integrally related ways: firstly as a formal process between mediums, languages, and landscapes that is part of Murray’s long standing concerns with the relationship between painting and photography. Secondly, having made this argument about translation in a formal sense, I want to conclude by complicating this reading somewhat, and examine these translations in a psychoanalytic sense, where the process of translation is the means by which something quite troubling about these works—something that is both excessive and absolutely integral—is both managed and expressed.

In order to see how translation can help us understand this work, let’s consider the process of its production in a bit more detail. *Die Welt in Farben* began as a book of color photographs of early twentieth century European landscapes—and to a lesser extent, portraits—that Murray purchased in a flea market while living in Berlin in 2011. The photographs depict places which would have been visited by wealthy European travellers and purchased as souvenirs in the years before colour photography was easily portable. From the outset, then, the source material for *Die*

Welt in Farben evokes something of the history of photography, as a medium at once popular and the province of elites, concerned with memory and the exotic. Each of the pieces in the exhibition takes one of these postcard-style photographs as its starting point, using it as a background for collaged elements ranging from brushstrokes and paint skins from Murray's paintings to photographs of objects and landscapes. The re-placed landscapes that result from this translation into collage are then translated again, as they are photographed in black and white to produce a print. This print is subjected to a final translation when colour is added back as it is re-touched in oil paint.

In some of these works, like *Tafel 35. St. Anton am Arlberg*, the finished piece looks like a collage of disjointed painter's marks layered atop an unrelated landscape; in others, like *Tafel 36. Zell am See*, different landscapes and marks have been overlain in such a way that it is difficult to discern where the background ends and collaged foreground begins, with Murray's brushstrokes both highlighting and obscuring the points of contact. In still others, like *Tafel 13. Das Matterhorn*, the collaged elements have been so transparently integrated into the original landscape that it appears untouched; by this point however, the viewer is probably too suspicious to be seduced by the photograph's promise of verisimilitude.

The effect of all these translations—the deceptive substitutions of one landscape for another, the sometimes abrupt juxtaposition of media against one another—is disorienting even as it is beautiful. If all this were not troubling enough to one attempting to describe *Die Welt in Farben*, the finished work itself is difficult to pin down. Is the finished work the re-touched prints that hang on the wall? Is it the book of collaged originals those prints were made from? What then about the book you are holding in your hands? Such questions have been central to art criticism since the birth of reproducible media like photography and *Die Welt in Farben* puts these questions center stage, framing them as questions of translation.

In his essay, "Translation and the Oulipo: The Case of the Persevering Maltese", The American Oulipian writer and translator Harry Mathews offers a fanciful example of translation that speaks to some of the issues at work in *Die Welt in Farben*¹. Mathews describes two fictional tribes encountered by his character, the Australian linguist Ernest Botherby. These two tribes—the Ohos and the Uhas—have no contact with each other, yet have one thing in common: they both rely primarily on gesture for communication with their spoken languages each containing only one statement. For the Ohos, Mathews translates the phrase as "red makes wrong"; for their neighbours the Uhas, he tells us it means "here not there". Having visited both of these tribes and wanting to describe one to the other, Botherby is stymied by the impossible task

¹ Harry Mathews, "Translation and the Oulipo: The Case of the Persevering Maltese," in *The Case of the Persevering Maltese: Collected Essays* (Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 2003), 67-84.

of translating the singular statement of each language into the other's tongue. As Mathews tells us, "he grasped at once what all translators eventually learn: a language says what it can say, and that's that."

This idea that a language can "say what it can say, and that's that" lies at the heart of *Die Welt in Farben*. Murray draws a parallel between language as something that can be translated and the translations that might be possible between painting, photography, and collage. What does it mean to "speak painting" in photographs, and to "speak photograph" in paint? What can one say in each of these media and what can be translated between them? A black and white photograph says certain things. The same can be said of painting. Both media speak in two dimensions, but each make different claims. Even if photography's claims to being a faithful representation of reality have been thoroughly critiqued over the past hundred years, photographs still occupy a privileged place in appeals to authenticity and verisimilitude. Painting, by comparison, was freed from the burden of having to faithfully represent the world, in part because of the rise of photography. Considering what these two media can say, and what they say in relation to each other, is a question that Murray raises in these works, essentially by playing with the conventions of translation.

This question has arguably been at the heart of Murray's practice for some time, preceding the works that make up *Die Welt in Farben* by a number of years. 2012's solo exhibition *Follow the Winter* at Skew Gallery, his collaboration with photographer Maxime Ballesteros for Art+Culture Editions (2010), and earlier photographs of his work by Yannick Grandmont all involve experiments with representing Murray's paintings in photographs, ranging from alternative printing techniques designed to render the work in colour-palettes more closely associated with different eras, to photographs that situate paintings in specific places, highlighting their status as object rather than surface. In these and other projects that revolve around the process of taking photos of paintings, we see Murray taking seriously the question of translation from one medium to another.

The concern is somewhat natural when one considers the sort of paintings Murray produces: three-dimensional sculptural works that jut out from the wall and drip off the frame in complex folds; paintings whose colours confront the viewer with an alarming intensity, playing tricks on the eye and confounding easy attempts to describe them. Such works do not lend themselves to easy representation in photographs; their folds and projections cast unflattering shadows as they are reduced to two dimensions, and the diversity of colours mean that no matter what approach a photographer takes, some sacrifices will have to be made with respect to which are inevitably misrepresented. It is in part out of this formal problem that Murray's interest in photography emerges and *Die Welt in Farben* can be read in part

as the latest iteration in an ongoing conversation about translation and representation. Rather than simply treating the two-dimensional representation of a three-dimensional object as a technical problem to be solved, this project makes the translation between mediums its central analytic: photographs become paintings and paintings are photographed in a recursive movement that brings to the fore both the vernacular of each medium and the futility of a faithful translation.

It is here that we can begin to see Murray's kinship with the Oulipo. The Oulipo, or *Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle*, is a French literary "workshop" founded in 1960 by Raymond Queneau and François Le Lionnais which included the novelists Georges Perec and Harry Mathews, mentioned above. The Oulipo are associated with formal experiments with the process of writing, which revolve around placing extreme lexical constraints on the author. Georges Perec's *La Disparition*, is perhaps the best known example, which is a three-hundred page novel written without using the letter "e". Lipograms and other forms of constrained writing are used by the Oulipo as experiments designed to open up new modes of literary expression, by purposefully giving up the formal and stylistic freedom that faces writers today: "So much freedom can be unnerving", explains Mathews, "If you can say anything, where do you start?"

Against the "freedom" of contemporary art and literature, Mathews argues for the generative possibilities—and pleasures—of constraint and restriction. Recalling his childhood, he describes how playing "any old way" was nothing compared to the joys of playing games like Capture the Flag: "hard games with tough rules", which demanded one's complete attention. The constraints imposed by Oulipean rules serve a similar function of structuring one's activity and perhaps even engendering pleasure when one can navigate them skillfully. Satisfying these rules is valuable, Mathews says, because it "keeps us too busy to worry about being reasonable".

I see Murray's kinship to the Oulipo in his attraction to "hard rules" such as those described by Mathews. Beneath many of the formal and aesthetic decisions in *Die Welt in Farben*, we see Murray placing restrictions on his practice: from the initial decision to construct a work around an existing book of photographs, meticulously removing and re-working each print, to the use of antiquated (and no longer manufactured) Marshall's Photo-oil paints to re-touch the finished prints, and, crucially, the decision to photograph color collages in black and white in the first place. These formal decisions, so central to the work, have the effect of producing novel aesthetic possibilities, by imposing constraints—of source, colour, and technique—which then require solutions that produce a unique effect.

Alongside these constraints, there is a similar Oulipian moment in Murray's approach to the "translation" of painting and collage to photograph and then back again to re-touched, or painted, photograph. Translation generally values some form

of fidelity to the original source. A literary translation is judged as being more or less accurate by how well it renders in a new language what was intended in the original. Likewise, the photographic reproduction of a painting is generally thought of as a technical exercise that is judged by how accurately it represents the work: do the colours match the original, and—in three-dimensional work like Murray’s—are shadows placed in such a way as to convey the work’s topography. As I have already described however, Murray has a longstanding interest in both the impossibilities of accurately translating his paintings to photographs and the aesthetic and conceptual possibilities of mis-translations. To return once more to the Oulipo, in his essay on translation, Mathews describes what Oulipian translation might consist of. Why, he asks, is the “nominal sense” of a statement what must be privileged above all else? Why only its content and not its form? Why not other formal elements such as the length or sound of individual words? By calling attention to the mechanics of language rather than simply its capacity to bear meaning, Oulipian translation lets us glimpse something of how language works and what aesthetic possibilities and pleasures await us outside of its ability to *make sense*. In similar fashion, I see Murray’s translations between media as calling attention to the mechanisms of their production, to the qualities of painting and photography as material processes. In *Die Welt in Farben*, photography’s capacity to flatten images does not simply detract from the original, it enhances Murray’s superimpositions of landscapes, making easy demarcations more difficult to discern. At the same time, photo-oil paint’s inability to “accurately” re-colour black and white photographs is exploited for its antiquated palette, which evokes something perfectly appropriate to photographs from the turn of the century.

The closer one looks, the more one realizes the extent to which the vagaries of translation have been exploited to produce these works. In *Tafel 20: Märkischer Wald*, a skin of paint hangs in the foreground, seemingly suspended by another collaged element from one of Murray’s paintings. Comparing the re-touched photograph to the original collage, one notices that the colours differ: in the collage, a pattern of dots appears white, in the photograph they have been re-touched as green. Looking at the collage and noticing the characteristic wash of a flash bulb on a reflective surface makes it apparent that what we are looking at is a photograph of a painting. When I ask Murray about the discrepancy, I learn that the dots were *originally* green: the “mistake” was not his in re-touching the print, but an anomaly of the photograph, which failed to capture the original colour, in part because the photograph was itself a photograph *of a photograph* of a painting. In moments like these, where the simple description of the work produces the vertiginous effect of orienting oneself between two parallel mirrors, we can see how complex this practice of translation becomes how Murray has plays with its conventions.

There is, however, another side to this Oulipian “game with tough rules”, and this is where I turn to the insights of psychoanalysis. Alongside the arbitrary structure of translation Murray has established in these works, we catch sight of a concomitant rejection of this structure and the rules it imposes. It is this simultaneous attraction and repulsion, this dialectic of acceptance and rejection, that enjoins us to examine these works psychoanalytically. As attracted as Murray is to structures that impose limits and demand adherence, there are crucial moments in these works where they exceed the rules of their own game. These moments are essential, because what makes *Die Welt in Farben* work is not just its exploration of the act of translation but a rejection of the rules and a certain excessive moment that sits in relation to it.

We catch sight of this rejection in Murray’s description of the origins of *Die Welt in Farben*. Originally, the piece was intended to address the question of translation even more explicitly. Alongside the photographs that made up the original book was a text, in German, describing the places depicted and the beauty of colour photography. Murray began translating the introduction and table of contents using dictionary definitions for each individual word (a technique, incidentally, also used by the Oulipo). Only a few pages of this experiment were ever finished, but in them, one can see the seeds of many of the ideas about translation that are more fully expressed in the translated photographs that went on to make up the piece: experiments with translation, arbitrary rules, and the uncanny effects such translation practices produce.

Murray abandoned this aspect of the project because it felt, he explained, too “pedantic”. As a formal decision, I am inclined to agree with him: the questions of translation and process that this work concerns are more subtly expressed through photographs than text and the concepts behind the work doesn’t require his being quite so explicit. Having said this, I don’t think it was an entirely formal or conceptual decision to abandon the explicit translation aspect of the project. Rather, I think that it serves as an excellent example of the tension in Murray’s work between freedom and constraint, between a desire for arbitrary structures and the desire to reject these same rules. We see it here, in a moment where making the conceptual basis for the work becomes slightly too explicit, as if revealing what makes the piece work would expose the artist too much.

We also glimpse it in those figures and formal gestures that aren’t as easily captured by this idea I have put forth about translation: here, I refer to the more ominous figures in *Die Welt in Farben*, women whose faces have been veiled by paint skins², or

² E.g. *Tafel 2. Junge Frau aus Anticoli*; *Tafel 15. La Bella Candida (Römisches Modell)*; as well as earlier work such as 2011’s *Page 69 Girl*, *Page 100 Girl*, and others in the same series.

curtains and picture frames that hang portentously in the foreground, creating the impression of something being obscured, or a void which we can only glimpse³.

There is something undeniably uncomfortable about these elements of *Die Welt in Farben*, something that is not reducible to a formal game or project of translation. Let me be clear: it is not my intention to reduce this work to the necessarily partial reading I have provided here. Like any work of art, *Die Welt in Farben* is overdetermined and polyvalent, a product of multiple inputs—processes, media, ideas and referents—and as such, is capable of being read in many ways. But what one encounters in these ominous moments is something that does not simply exceed my reading of these works, they exceed Murray's own account of them. When I discuss these gestures with him he uses the language of *horror*: horror at the act of obscuring faces, horror at the violence of collage, of cutting apart a book and taking its elements out of their context. Clearly, these acts trouble him, but the fact that they are repeated so often (indeed, with collage more broadly, they are absolutely central to the work) suggests that they excite as much as they trouble.

In the language of psychoanalysis, these gestures allow us to see something of the artist's *jouissance*, that disturbing pleasure-in-unpleasure, or pleasure-beyond-pleasure that Lacan argues is the "truth" of the subject. *Jouissance* is the "kick" we get from our symptom, it is the painful kind of thrill we get from something that we claim to dislike, and the unexpected appearance of *jouissance* (in speech, in art) is one of the ways we glimpse something that is normally repressed by the ego.

The first psychoanalytic description of *jouissance* comes from Freud, in his analysis of the his patient the "Rat Man" who was obsessed with a horrifying torture he had read about and worried might be visited on those he loved. Watching his face as he described the torture, Freud described his expression as "horror at pleasure of his own of which he himself was unaware"⁴. At the same time as he was horrified by these thoughts, there was also something that excited him; this something—this *jouissance*—is essential because it alludes to a certain subjective "truth".

This idea might even have some parallel in translation, at least of the Oulipian variety. Mathews tells us that truth is a slippery substance to keep hold of. Truth is something that only exists as a process, as something that is always *to come* rather than something that is, as something that exceeds the facts that one tries to pin down about it, as something that one glimpses as often in fantastical stories as realistic accounts. "On the page", he tells us, "truth begins when something real happens". The Lacanian resonance of this statement should be obvious: truth is of the Real;

³ E.g. *Tafel 06. Der Tempel der Konkordia bei Girgenti; Tafel 10. Der Aetna von Taormina aus Gesehn*

⁴ Sigmund Freud, "Notes Upon a Case of Obsessional Neurosis," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol. X, (1909) Two Case Histories*, ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 2001), 167.

truth appears in those rare moments when something that exceeds the self emerges, something that, by definition has been excluded from what the subject knows about him or herself.

Something of the order of truth is what I believe we see in the more ominous moments in Murray's work. In these veiled figures and in the acts of violent displacement that characterize collage, we see something of Murray's *jouissance*, something that excites and troubles the works he produces. Precisely what that truth might be has to remain nameless however; one of the limits of psychoanalytic thinking about art must be stopping at the door of psychoanalyzing the artist him or herself. Nevertheless, thinking about Murray's work in this way allows us to understand something crucial about them, namely its conflicted relationship with freedom and constraint, with conceptually informed processes and arbitrary acts, with structure and this excessive moment I have attempted to define. At the risk of coming dangerously close to offering a psychoanalytic interpretation of the sort I just warned about, I think it's possible that Murray is drawn to arbitrary rules like those used by the Oulipo as a way of grappling with his own on-going concerns around the arbitrary nature of decisions in art-making. In his remarks for 2008's exhibition, *The Strange Space that Will Keep us Together*, Murray makes explicit references to the "horrors of banal choices", and argues that "in every choice, there is an element of madness". There is a sense of terror in much of Murray's writing about his work about what lies behind it, a fear perhaps that nothing does, or that the concepts that should be there to justify it do not exist—that it is perhaps all smoke and mirrors. This might explain the desire for approaches like that proposed by the Oulipo, for systems that celebrate the arbitrary and revel in the absurdity of choice.

This is not to say that I think Murray's work actually does lack conceptual rigour—on the contrary I think it shows a singular vigilance and attention to the poetics and politics of form. Rather, I think this terror—this "horror of banal choices"—speaks to the horror of those excessive, potentially traumatic, moments that actually give his work so much life. And it is not in spite of but *through* the Oulipian process of translation I have described that these moments appear. As Mathews says, "Thanks to the impossible rules, we find ourselves doing and saying things we would never have imagined otherwise, things that often turn out to be exactly what we need". Through impossible rules, we can see something that is otherwise invisible—or perhaps, we can *bear* something that couldn't be sustained on its own.

It is around this excessive, unbearable moment then that Murray's practice of translation circulates. Translation in *Die Welt in Farben* serves as both the means through which excess is managed—domesticated, we might say—and the medium by which it is expressed. My argument is that Murray's anxiety about having a suitable explanation for his work, for a solid conceptual basis that could explain

every gesture and defend against the idea that none of this means anything, is actually an anxiety over this crucial moment of excess—this eruption of jouissance—that so animates these pieces. The fear that there is *nothing* behind the artwork is more properly understood as a fear that *something* might actually be there—that behind the paint skins, drapes, and veiled faces, something else exists.